
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen (Romans 1:8)

In today's Gospel Lesson, we once again have opportunity to ask, "What was Peter thinking?" with his question. **"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?"** I don't know about you. But I get it. Unless your mother kept you in bubble wrap and living in an attic, you've interacted with people and you've been hurt by people. In asking this question, Peter may have had specific individuals in mind. And maybe you do too. Think about some of the most difficult people you've ever known. Not just disagreeable, stubborn, careless, immature or a little vain. Think manipulative, hateful, set only on what they want and willing to hurt others. And not in the least bit sorry for what they've done.

I'm thinking of a man, a Muslim man, who kidnapped his six-year-old daughter from her mother to spite her, and held the daughter captive in his home for nearly ten years. No school. No interaction with others. He took her childhood away. The daughter escaped when she was sixteen but she wasn't really free until she came to faith in Christ and forgave an obviously evil man who never repented. She really did! I saw it happen! This woman did what most people would say she shouldn't have to do. But Jesus would beg to differ. Did you hear how the parable of the unmerciful servant ended? **This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or your sister from your heart.** In other words, you can take that person that you have in mind, that person who did something evil to you that really hurt you, that you did not deserve...and you can forgive them from the heart, or you can go to hell!

The Bible does not teach "once saved, always saved" (Hebrews 10:26, 27). Unrepentant sin can ensnare someone and cause them to lose their faith and end up in hell. For some, it's a head issue. "I used to believe in Jesus when I was young, but then...evolution." That happens. But today, Jesus wants to talk to us about a *heart issue* that leads many people to reject forgiveness in Christ, even while still imagining that they are believers headed to heaven. "How can I forgive someone who sins against me when...what they did hurt so bad...they aren't even sorry...etc?" The rabbis of Jesus' day taught that a person was obligated to forgive someone for the same sin three times. If the same person committed the same sin a fourth time, then the person who was wronged need not forgive. Peter, knowing that Jesus was much more gracious and forgiving, probably thought he had hit upon the right answer when he took the conventional wisdom of his day, doubled it and added one. **"Up to seven times?"** Imagine the look on Peter's face. **"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."** Jesus is not saying that the person who commits the same sin against you seventy-eight times (or 491 times if you are reading the King James) should not be forgiven. The point is that Jesus commands his followers to forgive without keeping count. And, to drive that point home, Jesus tells the parable for our consideration today. All of Jesus' parables are masterpieces but this sticks in my mind. It should be enough for God to tell us as he does in Ephesians 4, "Forgive each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you." But Jesus knows how much his disciples then and now struggle to forgive. And so, he tells this story that is guaranteed to stick with us as we ponder this truth...

Forgiveness is Better for Everyone (Except One).

Jesus wants us thinking about a certain king and a servant that was deep in debt. He owed the king **"ten thousand bags of gold."** The literal measurement is ten thousand talents. The value of a talent at this time was probably around 6,000 drachmas, or denarii. Considering that a drachma or denarius was a day's wage for most laborers (Matt 20:2), this man would have had to work 60,000,000 days to satisfy his debt! **The master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'** ²⁷ **The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.**

Later the king would say, **"I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to."** This is no ordinary king! An indebted man asks for patience and he gets mercy instead. This king is rich in mercy; he is not thinking about what is owed him, he is instead being controlled by his gut feeling of mercy. The act of forgiving this man's debt is described with two beautiful words that are elsewhere used to describe God's act of forgiving us in Christ. *This man was released from his debt; his debt was sent away.* Indeed, forgiveness is better for everyone! Except one. Someone still had to pay for the debt. In this situation, the only one who could do that was the king. We don't know how he did it but even if he were a tremendously wealthy man, it must have cost him dearly to absorb a debt of this size. He was willing to do so because he was full of mercy and compassion. **But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.** ²⁹ **"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'**

But what if I don't WANT to forgive? What that person did hurt so much. It was unfair. I didn't deserve it." If that is how you are feeling, take a look at the debt that was owed. *One hundred denarii* is no small amount. That is three months' worth of wages. If someone owed you three months of your wages, you would probably be upset with them too! Maybe you would get a little physical. When someone sins against you, they truly do owe you a debt. You will notice that the second indebted servant cries out for the same thing that the first indebted servant asked for. Patience. Long-suffering. When that first servant cried out for patience from the king, he received mercy. When the second servant cried out for patience from his fellow servant he received bodily harm. Forgiveness would have been better. For everyone. For this poor second servant. And for the fellow servants that were scandalized by the unforgiving man's behavior. **When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly grieved and went and told the master.** What a scandal it can be when people see professing Christians refuse to forgive. "You know, old Frank, he goes to church but you don't want to cross him. He doesn't let anything go. Janine always carries a grudge." What kind of witness is that to the world? Forgiveness would be better. For everyone. For the people around us, for those who sin against us and for the sinned against individual. **'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?** Notice that the king doesn't say that the wicked servant's forgiveness should have matched the king's forgiveness. That would have been impossible. But the wicked servant should have remembered mercy. Those who have been shown mercy will show mercy. **But he refused.** As shocking as it would have been to be told that you and your family are going into slavery to pay back your debt, this man's situation was even worse after he received mercy and refused to show mercy! **In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.** Forgiveness would have been better. This calls to mind Jesus' teaching that on Judgment Day it will be worse for those who experienced the forgiveness of Jesus and turned their back on it, than for those who never knew the grace and mercy of Christ at all (Matt 11:20-24).

This is how my heavenly Father will treat all of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from the heart. How do you know when you have forgiven from the heart? The fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer provides insight. "Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:9-13). By teaching us to pray this way, Jesus acknowledges that our forgiveness of others will be an ongoing struggle but his forgiveness for us will be there as the model, but more importantly the motivation. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). "Forgive as Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). The reason the wicked servant's actions are so abhorrent is that we see him leaving the throne room of unimaginable grace. The merciful king forgave him his debt at great cost to himself. Forgiveness is better for everyone here except for the King who pays for it.

Who should pay for a husband's adulterous affair? Justice would say that he should. Indeed, even a repentant man will still have to work through the feelings of guilt and the family consequences of his sin, but who really pays for his night of fun? His wife does. The Christian wife, whether or not she chooses to remain married to her unfaithful husband (Matt 19:9) chooses to accept the burden of the emotional pain her husband's sin has caused her. Whenever she feels that pain, she chooses not to dwell on it, but she takes the pain to Christ. So, he has all the "fun" and she suffers most of the pain? That hardly seems fair, but was it "fair" that Jesus should have chosen to bear the true, eternal consequences of ALL our sin when he died on the cross? It wasn't "fair" as we normally think of the word but it was just and it was merciful.

This is why we say forgiveness is better for everyone except the One who pays for it. And your Jesus did so willingly, graciously, lovingly for you. Instead of this endless cycle of "hurt people hurting people" Jesus' cross can be the place where your pain goes to die. We love because he first loved us. We forgive because he first forgave us. The parable of the unmerciful servant is a powerful warning not to leave behind the throne room of God's mercy where forgiveness has been poured over us today in word and water and gospel proclamation. While a refusal to forgive is the path to the lowest part of hell, the struggle to forgive takes us back to the throne room of God's mercy and empowers us to share that mercy with others. There is a great article in the September Forward in Christ by Pastor Matt Ruah about the binding and the losing key. He says, "While we cannot use the losing key on an unrepentant sinner, we can still have forgiveness in our hearts...we forgive that person when we refuse to cling to bitterness and hatred even when he or she forces us to use the binding key."

"Lord, how many times?" The common interpretation of Jesus' "77" answer is that he was speaking hyperbolically. Few of us can reasonably expect someone to commit the same sin against us seventy-seven times. But consider our Lord's response from the view of human memory. Some sins are so damaging that they only need to be committed once but, if you remember it, sometimes it can seem like the same person is there doing the same wicked thing to you again. Now, all of a sudden, Jesus' number doesn't seem so ridiculous, does it? When the devil calls to mind past sins that hurt you even if they happened many years ago, forgive! Choose not to have bitterness in your heart and flee to the throne room of God's grace. The King who is rich in mercy has a full pardon for you. And that's better for everyone. Amen.